

Is It the Last Checkered Flag for Big Willie Robinson?

Track's Founder May Have Lost His Battle With the Harbor Dept.

By AL MARTINEZ, Times Staff Writer

Big Willie Robinson is standing up to his full 6-foot-6 and he is punching the air furiously with a fist the size of a pot roast and hollering, "Man, I don't threaten nobody 'cause that would ice me for good!"

Everytime he punches the air, his biceps, which are 21 inches around, flex and unflex, and his 58-inch chest expands ominously, as though Big Willie is just plain going to huff up and blow everything away.

He weighs 300 pounds, and it is arranged in awesome proportions.

"The Harbor Department's crazy they think I'd threaten anyone! I ain't violent, man! I use public relations!" He slams a fist of frustration into an open palm.

Big Willie is full of rage and sorrow.

Vents His Rage

He stands in the old wooden control tower of the Brotherhood Raceway Park on Terminal Island, venting the rage and damping the sorrow.

The sounds of the waterfront clank and boom around what he calls a ghost track. A string of tattered black and white checkered pennants flap and flutter in the breeze.

Off in the distance is what had been a ticket booth for the empty race track. A sign on it says, "Run what you brung."

In its heyday, stretching back for about the last seven years, that is what the Brotherhood Raceway Park was all about—a conglomeration of motor-driven vehicles, cars and bikes and vans, that raced every weekend.

"They were street racers," Big Willie says angrily, "and we got 'em off the street—the little thugs, the low-riders, everybody."

"Now they'll be back on the streets, man, and we're all gonna be going to some funerals."

The object of Big Willie's anger is the Los Angeles Harbor Commission, which last month voted the death of the 32-acre drag strip on port property in the shadow of the Vincent Thomas Bridge.

It is the seventh time in seven years that Willie An-



FITZGERALD WHITNEY / Los Angeles Times

Big Willie Robinson at a rally earlier this year in support of his race track that now appears to be doomed.

drew Robinson III, erstwhile King of the Street Racers, has been put out of business.

But for six times he has come back thundering and howling like a gulf hurricane, and each time the Broth-

erhood Raceway Park has won a reprieve.

This time, for all of his awesome rage, the uncertainties are apparent. The politics of bluster don't seem to be working.

"It's closed and done with," says Harbor Department property management director Steven Dillenbeck. "Willie is not a port-related tenant and we need the land."

"There's nothing personal," says the port's deputy director, Jack Wells. "The drag strip was supposed to be temporary in the first place. The time has come."

Big Willie at 38 is vowing to continue the fight. "I learned long ago," he says, quieting some, "not to just swallow my pride and stand there."

During the course of his fight with the Harbor Department, Big Willie has rarely just stood there.

Almost always wearing a black derby and a tank top, muscles bulging under the tight material, he has broached his enemy in its civic fortress.

His monologues at Harbor Commission meetings have become so endless and insistent that even a commissioner friendly to Willie's cause has had to tell him to shut up and sit down.

Once he challenged Dillenbeck to a fist fight "because that may be the only way we're gonna settle this thing." Dillenbeck ignored the challenge.

Racism Charged

Big Willie has yelled racism ("I know when I'm being called 'nigger' behind closed doors"), has denied charges from the Harbor Department that he was threatening anyone (Palms out, perplexed: "Hey, man, not me . . .") and has tried to stay cool.

"The truth is," he says forlornly, "they got no respect for me . . ."

Mayor Tom Bradley (Big Tom, Willie calls him) believes in what the Brotherhood Raceway is trying to do, and so does an assortment of policemen, lawyers, cops and street people.

Getting the street racers off the street is, in its purest form, a decent goal.

"There's no question Willie is sincere," Bradley says. They have known each other since 1968. "I supported the idea of a track then and I support it now."

Big Willie blew out of New Orleans, chased from the South by white gunfire, looking for a quieter life in Los Angeles.

He bought a 5-year-old Olds in 1962 and discovered street racing down at 78th and Western, where the white kids from the San Fernando Valley and the black dudes from the ghetto were learning about brotherhood to the tune of roaring car engines and flashing pavements.

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RACERS: the Politics of Bluster

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"When you get around cars, man, there ain't no colors, just engines," Willie says, thinking back to those easier days.

Size quickly gave Big Willie stature on the streets. Respect. The word runs through his conversation. Already big, he began weight-lifting, and soon learned, in his words, "The stronger I got the more respect I got."

He began to see that tearing indiscriminately around the streets and squirreling down the midnight tracks (the long alleys by the old Goodyear plant at Florence and Central, Exposition Boulevard between La Brea and Crenshaw, here and there) was bringing heat.

Big Willie believes in God and a kind of street-based common law and didn't want problems with the cops.

Got the Message

So as he became a larger-than-life street king he began laying down certain rules, like no drinking and no doping and no squirreling (dangerous showing off). The racers used blocked-off streets, and they did it right.

"Sometimes," says Big Willie, who doesn't smoke or drink, "I'd have to take a beer away from one of the little thugs, and if he'd grab it back, I'd just reach out and take it again and maybe slap him a little.

"They got the message," he adds with a grin. "I'm not the kind of dude you'd want to meet in a back alley."

No legend the size of Big Willie goes unnoticed for long, even in a big city, and the police began to hear about the King of the Street Racers.

They were intrigued by what Big Willie was accomplishing on the streets; especially the mixture of races that were getting together in the flammable '60s without going for each other's throats. They suggested he organize.

He did. Willie came up with something called the Brotherhood of Street Racers. He is vague on the numbers. Nobody pays dues.

Raceway Was Born

About the end of '74 he got the Harbor Department to go along with establishing a drag strip off Ferry Street on Terminal Island and the Brotherhood Raceway was born. Bradley backed him.

"Run what you brung" was the way it had been on the streets, and it was that way at the strip. Big Willie and his wife, Tomiko, hustled up donations, sank their life savings into the track and went into business.

The street people came, Willie says 500 to 1,000 each weekend: the tattooed, thick-necked bikers, the jivers,

the low-riders, but so did the kids in white Porsches.

The Brotherhood charged \$5 a head for racers and watchers, but allowed policemen and firemen in free, and sometimes let gang members in without paying too because that, Willie figured, was what brotherhood was all about.

It seemed good. Big Willie tried to do the thing right. The track had insurance, and an ambulance and a fire truck standing by. No one has ever been killed racing there (one man died in a non-racing-related accident), and there were no gang fights.

"But I don't know," Willie says. "They began telling me there was the wrong kind of people around and they weren't making enough money. You know."

The Brotherhood of Street Racers was paying the Harbor from \$1,000 to \$3,500 a month, but soon the city was making sounds like it could get more.

"The average port rent," Dillenbeck says, "is \$1,500 a month per acre. Willie paid about \$1,000 a month for 32 acres, when he paid it. That just isn't enough."

Inevitable Happened

It had to end. Willie was bringing street talk into quiet meeting rooms and it wasn't flying. Even the support of Mayor Bradley worked only for a while, and policemen testifying on Willie's behalf could not stave off the inevitable.

The Harbor Commission vote last month was 3 to 2, and no bulging muscles or derby trademark or street flash could change it.

The Brotherhood Raceway Park was dead. "Man," Willie says, standing in the old wooden control tower, windows open, looking down at the quarter-mile strip, "I still can't believe it."

Not Much Money

When Willie says he's going to fight, he means it. Willie has always meant it. The Brotherhood has got an attorney, Beatrice Lawson, and she not only believes in Big Willie but in what Big Willie believes in.

Willie doesn't have much money—just what he gets from managing a gym in Manchester or from racing occasionally. But what he's got, he vows, is going to go to getting his track back.

"You've got to buy the idea," Lawson says, "that letting kids race in a safe place is doing good for the streets. Street racing does not necessarily equate with riff-raff. We've got to teach them that."

Big Willie has also got City Councilman Robert Farrell and two harbor commissioners in his corner, and all

of them are going to try to revive the track at the commission's next board meeting.

"We've got some things planned," attorney Lawson says.

Big Willie, meanwhile, is thinking about not coming on with bulk and bluster, maybe leaving the political infighting to those who know it best.

What's in it for Willie? He hasn't made a dime off the track, Willie says, and the books are open to anyone who wants to see them.

"Maybe," Willie says, "it's just that I've got to show them who we are. We've got to earn a little respect. . . ."